



www.australianbrumbyalliance.org.au

Australian Brumby Alliance (ABA)

Brumby Resource Information-2.1

The Origins of Australia's Wild Horses

Kosciuszko's Snowy Brumby

Introduction

Each Brumby population has its own historic origins and heritage value. This document will look at NSW's Kosciuszko Snowy Brumby, an image etched in many Post Settlement and Aboriginal communities. *Note: Other NSW Brumby population histories to come later.*

The history of Kosciuszko Brumbies began with the release of horses into the wild by early European settlers. Over the years there have been many views and opinions expressed on how the Brumby should be sustained and whether or not Brumbies should be there at all. However many people now believe that we need to maintain a viable, sustainable number within the environment and that any Brumbies removed must be caught humanely and be offered to people skilled in rehoming Wild Horses.

If we all work together our Brumbies can be saved and retained as a living part of Australia's social history and culture, such as in areas that are now covered by National Parks, and where they have lived for over 200 years.

The ABA thanks the contributions from The Victorian Brumby Association, Jaime Levey and other ABA members.

Australia's Brumby Heritage history

Horses arrived in Australia in 1788 with the First Fleet and became man's best friend in the early years of European settlement in Australia. Early horse arrivals came mainly from Cape, Barb horses, Thoroughbreds and Arabians breeds. The horses of Australia had to be tough, strong and be able to survive the harsh climate.

By 1800 there were 200 horses in Australia; rising to 3,500 by 1820. The first report of an escaped horse is in 1804. By 1850 the horse population had grown to 160,000, such was the reliance settlers had on using horses for agriculture, transport, mining, police work and sport.

Many horses escaped or were released into the bush where they lived as Wild Horses until they were captured and used as required. Ancestors of the modern day Brumbies were used during the two World Wars as well as the Boer War in South Africa. Horses captured from the wild were bred for the remount trade. During World War I a large number of remounts used by the Light Horse troops came from the Snowy Mountains and NSW Tablelands and

became known as Walers (i.e. from New South Wales). Horses that were bred in the in the wild proved to be calm and sure footed in domestic life.

The Brumbies we see in the NSW Kosciuszko highlands today are thought to have originated from horses left behind when Sergeant James Brumby was transferred from Botany Bay to Van Diemen's Land in 1806. The horses proved hard to catch from unfenced properties and became known as Brumby's horses – eventually shortened to Brumbies. Men who left to go to World War 1 let their working horses run wild, expanding the earlier Brumby gene pool base, but many of the men never returned to catch them again after the War ended.

The Australian Heritage Brumby has served and died for us in war, carried us around the outback, mustered stock and carried our kids to school.

Settlers no longer needed horses when machinery began replacing working and army horses. With the arrival of the Depression years and industrialisation, many locals simply opened their gates and let their horses 'join the wild bush horses...' as Banjo Patterson described it.

After a century working for humans, and machinery taking over their work, many unwanted horses were left to live a wild existence. Although many horses that were set free may not have survived, the strongest did, and these became the ancestors of the present day Brumby. Today's Brumbies are a window back into early settlement lives. A "living heritage" that we need to manage sensitively for future Australian generations to experience and learn from.

Kosciuszko National Park

Historic overview

The Snowy Mountains region is thought to have had Aboriginal occupation for some twenty thousand years. Large-scale intertribal gatherings were held in the High Country during summer for collective feasting on the Bogong moth. This practice continued to around 1865.

The area was first explored by Europeans in 1835. Around 1840, high-country stockmen, used the Snowy Mountains for grazing during the summer and their early experiences are recounted in Banjo Paterson's *The Man From Snowy River*. Cattle graziers left a legacy of mountain huts scattered across the area. In the 19th century, gold was mined on the high plains near Kiandra and at its height, Kiandra had around 4,000 people and 14 hotels, before ending up as a ghost town after the last resident left in 1974.

During 1906 the region became known as the *National Chase Snowy Mountains*, in 1944 *Kosciuszko State Park* was proclaimed, then in 1967 the *Kosciuszko National Park* came into being. The Snowy Mountains Scheme constructed between 1949–74, saw much of the area explored and roads up-graded to build dams and tunnels across the Park in one of the world's largest engineering projects.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW NPWS) *website* explains that NPWS is required to "protect native habitats, native fauna and flora and geological features within its reserves. This includes the minimisation of impacts of introduced species, including Wild Horses, on park values". This legal responsibility comes from State, Federal and international legislation and agreements such as the National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1974 (NSW), the Threatened Species Conservation Act, 1995 (NSW) and the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, 1999 (Commonwealth). UNESCO 'Man in the Biosphere' and Ramsar listings, for example, must also be taken into consideration.

Kosciuszko's Heritage Brumbies

Freed settler horses reverted to *natural selection* and *survival of the fittest*. Unsound traits in these horses could not survive the harsh Alpine terrain long enough to contribute to the gene pool. 'Hot' or fiery tempered horses wasted energy, getting thin running around and so lacked sufficient food reserves to survive winter snows, leaving the sound, the sane and the sturdy.

Did you know - **57% of KNP is without horses** - the remaining 43% has 6,000 [+/- 2,000] Brumbies living in 300,000ha (2014) (NPWS website) or an average of 50ha/horse.

Ancestors of the Kosciuszko Brumby include both the early Brumbies caught and bred for the remount trade, known now as Walers, those freed after industrialisation arrived and a mix of other escaped horses, providing a wide variety of Brumby 'types'. Colours can range vastly from bays and browns to roans, the sought after 'creamies' made famous by Eleyne Mitchells Silver Brumbies series and the pintos. Kosciuszko Brumbies have evolved to cope with their harsh climate, usually maturing between 13.3 and 15hh and of a medium to stocky build.

One of the most exceptional things about Brumbies is their ability to not only adapt, but to thrive once domesticated. These once Wild Horses are renowned for their patient, sociable temperament and their ability to bond closely with 'their' human mob.

The Social life of the Naturalised Australian Brumby

Brumbies are truly Wild Horses, having for over 200 years been living by nature's laws of *natural selection* and *survival of the fittest*. Horses living wild, by nature's tough rules, have been *re-wilded* by once again returning to live as their distant ancestors once did before a long period of being domesticated by humans.

DNA testing in NSW has shown that the Brumbies in the Guy Fawkes Park are less than 5% inbred, in comparison with Thoroughbreds, who are around 20% inbred!

Brumbies are very social animals and live together in family groups known as *mobs*, *harem groups* or *bands* which vary in size from 2 horses up to around 11. The lead mare is the most dominant female of the mob and searches out good food and water. All Brumbies are attuned to any potential danger or attack. The lead mare will lead the group away from minor threats with the stallion placing himself between the threat and his mob.

If the threat is extreme, the stallion takes the lead and the rest bolt after him. Brumbies have their foals at a similar time of year to the domestic horse. In the Alps, this is between September and November. Mares generally wander a small distance from the main Mob to foal and return after up to a couple of days with their offspring.

When young colts are old enough to start showing interest in the mobs mares, the stallion drives them away. The colts then form 'bachelor mobs', practice their fighting skills and keeping an eye out for any mares that they can steal from other stallions. The fillies, in turn, tend to peel away from the family mob as they reach sexual maturity, seeking out one of the bachelor stallions to mate with.

Brumbies are also known for their even tempers, hardiness, versatility and good endurance.

Brumbies tend to live in a particular area which is known as their home range. The size of this area can vary from 5 to 20 square kilometres and is influenced by the availability of food and water and the prevalence of other Brumby mobs in the area. Seasonal factors are also important with many Brumby mobs grazing the higher areas of the snowies in summer and moving to lower and warmer home ranges in winter.

Management of the Kosciuszko Brumby

Early settlers would catch and work local Brumbies as they needed them. More concerted efforts to control Kosciuszko National Park [KNP] Brumbies began in the early 1970's with a licensed horse roping running program, however due to concerns regarding the humaneness of this practise on the Brumbies targeted, as well as the safety risks to the riders and their horses and the health concerns for the brumby, this practice was banned in 1982.

Without traditional Brumby running and working the Brumbies, the total population tended to increase. During the late 1990's when environmental impacts were noted, the less shy and more visible Brumby was blamed, rather than more abundant, but less visible species.

Although many over abundant species, such as pigs, goats, deer, cats, dogs, rabbits etc. lived in Kosciuszko's landscape, park authorities increasingly focussed on removing Brumbies in an effort to reduce environmental impacts.

Kosciuszko's National Park [KNP] Brumby Populations

KNP 2001-2020 horse populations/removals sourced from NPWS website;

2001: ACT/NSW/Vic (total ALPs) count estimated 5,200 horses [Dawson 2009]

2003: ACT/NSW/Vic count estimated 2,369 horses [Walter 2003]

2003: Total ALPs – 2500 KNP – 1500 Removed 49 (NPWS website)

2003-2006: Total ALPs – 5000 KNP – 2500 Removed 133 (NPWS website)

2006–2009: **Total ALPs - 7679 KNP - 4237** Removed 362 (NPWS website)

2009–2012: Total ALPs - 9672 KNP - 4836 Removed 588 (NPWS website)

2012–2014: **Total ALPs - tba KNP - 6000** Removed 1558 (NPWS website)

Note: Highest trapping rate NPWS have achieved to date is 670 in one year, costing \$1,074/horse trapped by National Park Authorities.

Population growth

The issue of how Brumby populations grow or contract is debated widely. Factors impacting on Brumby numbers in Kosciuszko include; seasonal forage fluctuations, snow density and depth, wild fires [the 2003 fires more than halved the Kosciuszko's Brumby population] and the relationship of population density to an area's forage carrying capacity.

Foaling survival rates are used to predict population increases. However, emphasising foaling rates alone fails to include natural attrition rates Brumbies experience from factors such as; old age, injury, snake bites, dog attacks etc. and only inflate expected population increases.

We need to begin objective, comprehensive research into all factors currently influencing population dynamics in Kosciuszko National Park. These dynamics must to be understood before we 'tinker at the edges', in an effort to effectively and humanely manage Brumby populations at a viable and sustainable level for future generations to learn from.

The first Kosciuszko Horse Management Plan drafted in 2000 was finalised by 2003. Around March 2016 a new draft Horse Management Plan for Kosciuszko's National Park [KNP] is to be released for a two month community consultation process before the plan is finalised and implemented. With the most recent count of about 6,000 wild brumbies roaming free, there is a high risk of radical culling if an agreed Brumby population is not identified and managed. An agreed population level could be, for example, where any negative impact is minimised and the potential benefits are maximised. Comprehensive environmental studies need to be conducted to measure the impact (if any) of brumbies at different density levels.

There is a high risk that the Brumby, which is highly visible, will be blamed, as most other animal causing impacts are timid and move under cover of darkness or higher vegetation.

Sustaining Healthy Ecosystems

There is an urgent need to understand and identify components of each healthy ecosystem in Australia, then work to protect those, rather than ad hoc targeting one highly visible species. By focussing on one species without understanding how it interacts with other species in that ecosystem we risk a flow on effect that may be extremely detrimental to other species. The Sun Moth, requires short cropped grass for nesting, other bird and insect species rely on fresh green grass. Short, green grass significantly lowers the fuel loads that wild fires thrive on.

Overseas research is increasingly demonstrating how the presence of Wild Horse populations will in fact *benefit, not detract* from, an ecosystem's biodiversity, provided their numbers are maintained at a viable, sustainable level – surely a win win!

Unfortunately, throughout history we humans have assumed we know best what should be done, without stopping to consider all potential side effects. We introduced quick growing grasses (later classifies as invasive species) to firm up the stream banks in Kosciuszko, then began spreading across most Kosciuszko areas. We built the magnificent Snowy Mountains Hydro system only to find that blocking natural spring floods from flowing downstream to the sea has caused significant ecological damage. Such as the Murray River silting up and preventing annual floods generating extra water that is essential to boost spring growth.

Balanced populations of all species inhabiting an ecosystem, including Brumbies, should be within a tolerance range that allows landscape to seasonally regenerate. Research is needed to identify at what stage the Brumbies home territory starts to loose seasonal integrity. The same research must also identify what damage is caused by other animals, such as pigs, goats, deer, cats, dogs, rabbits, including humans etc. also in the park.

Based on the most recent Wild Horse count for Kosciuszko's region of 6,000 in 2014, from 4,237 in 2009 plus adding the 2,000 Brumbies removed during that period, we find that the population increase was 11%. If we multiply 6000 (population in 2014) by 11% the number of horses required for removal would 660 each year, a target already achieved by NPWS passive trap program which has removed 670 horses in one year.

There are several humane management tools the Australian Brumby Alliance accepts as one of several to consider using in the toolbox for Brumby management for varying conditions;

- Passive trapping has excellent application in areas with good vehicle access, but can be limited in others,
- Fertility control can be effectively used in areas with poor vehicle access,

- Slow aerial mustering is an appropriate occasional application in areas where there are overabundant populations that need to be brought back to a viable, sustainable level,
- Exclusion fencing can protect smaller, highly sensitive areas with the added benefit that vehicles are not able to access these areas either.

The ABA strongly opposes aerial shooting and ground shooting of unrestrained horses due to the inability to achieve head shots for immediate insensibility and death or to be able to immediately confirm death or to follow up and euthanize injured Brumbies.

Note: The Brumbies caught should be made available for domestication by rehoming people skilled in working with Brumbies and able to transport them in approved vehicles direct from the wild to a new future. If Brumbies cannot be collected by skilled rehomers, it may then be necessary to euthanize them on site, according to strict protocols, rather than trucking them in bulk, enduring 2 or 3 truck transfers, over a thousand Kms, only to meet death an abattoir.

And finally ... a few examples of Exceptional Brumby Achievements

- The Brumbies even tempers, hardiness, versatility and good endurance is well suited to a wide range of activities including endurance racing, show jumping, stock work, competitive trail riding, dressage, polocrosse and pony club.
- There have been exceptional brumbies that have done some amazing things, such as Quigley who was captured and re-homed to be gentled, then went on to winning an 160km Tom Quilty Gold Cup endurance race against 250 other horses.
- A Brumby named Mickey Mouse competed in the Pony and Galloway Junior Show jumping at the Sydney Royal Show. Being only 13.2hh he seemed small but could easily clear jumps at 1.75m high and 1.8m wide. Mickey Mouse made it to the A grade show jumping level of the Equestrian Federation of Australia and lived to 38 years old.
- A brumby named Hawkeye also won enough to become an A grade showjumper. He won Grand Prix and was almost unbeatable in 6 bar competitions. He successfully completed a World Cup Qualifier Show jumping competition at the Brisbane Royal Show.

Australian Brumby Alliance 4-Mar-2016